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ABSTRACT

This paper presents results from a contrastive study of qualification devices used in a 400,000-word corpus of English argumentative texts, written by English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) Spanish university students, U.S. university students, and native professional writers (newspaper editorials in English). The study attempted to account for the great differences between native and non-native texts in regard to use of the modal verbs "can," "could," "may," "might," and "must." The study also proposed reasons for why over- or underuse should occur in the EFL texts as compared to the professional editorial texts. Results indicated that some of the problems Spanish writers experienced may have been due to discourse differences between Spanish and English (first language factors). The study confirmed differences that appeared in previous research in relation to the discourse conventions used in constructing writer stance. The overuse by Spanish writers of "we can" and "we must" followed by verbs of mental and verbal processes suggested a transfer of politeness strategies from the Spanish academic context. In regard to reporting verbs as a qualification device, results revealed that the total tokens were similar, but the frequencies for individual verbs varied notably. (Contains 29 references.) (SM)

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A contrastive study of qualification devices in native and non-native argumentative texts in English

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1. Qualification devices and writer stance

This paper, part of the work for a project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education (BFF2000-0699-C02-01[2]), presents the results of a contrastive study of qualification devices used in a 400,000-word corpus of English argumentative texts, written by EFL Spanish university students, American university students, and native professional writers (newspaper editorials in English). By *qualification*, we mean the type of evidentiality (source of knowledge) that Palmer (1986) has included within modality. By *devices*, we mean the grammatical and lexical means used to construct writer *stance*, defined as "...the positioning of a social agent with respect to alignment, power, knowledge, belief, evidence, affect and other socially salient categories" (Du Bois, 2000).

Teachers of academic writing have long noted that Basic Writers of English as a first language (L1) and writers of English as a Second Language (ESL) or as a Foreign Language (EFL) frequently experience difficulty in establishing writer stance for the propositions they put forth. Many years ago, Shaughnessy (1977: 240) noted that one of the major tasks for the Basic Writer (BW) of English (L1) is to develop "an understanding of the expectations and needs of the academic or professional audience". She further pointed to the "many evidences in BW papers of the egocentricity of the apprentice writer, an orientation that is reflected in the assumption that the reader understands what is going on in the writer's mind and needs therefore no introductions or transitions or explanations".

Upon analyzing EFL texts from the *International Corpus of Learner English* (*ICLE*), Petch-Tyson (1998) found that the four EFL groups studied (Dutch, Belgian French, Finnish and Swedish) used more indicators of high personal, writer-reader visibility, such as first-and-second person pronouns, than did the American university writers. A close examination of the concordance lines of these texts revealed that the native writers' use of *I* appeared in chains of past-tense sentences which recounted personal experiences. The non-native writers, on the other hand, used the first person pronoun for interactive functions involved in managing the flow of information (*I can take the example of*) or in order to insert the writer's opinion or evaluation (*I said, I think that*).

For more than two decades, researchers in fields such as discourse analysis and applied linguistics (Hoey 1979, 1983; Jordan 1984) have studied various forms of propositional (ideational) coherence in the construction of the discourses of different disciplines. Until more recently, however, relatively little work has been carried out in analyzing interpersonal interaction, including the use of politeness strategies (Cherry 1988; Meyers 1989; Hyland 2000), of attribution and of evaluative coherence

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[2] Contrastive Analysis of the Expression of Evidentiality in English and Spanish: A Corpus Study of Argumentative Texts Written by English- and Spanish-speaking University Students.

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(Hunston 1994; Hunston and Thompson 2000). The latter approaches show more concern with the interpersonal function, in that they focus on the roles writers assume in conducting interaction with their readers rather than on supporting the validity of a proposition. With a few exceptions (Hinkel 1997; Thompson 2001; Thompson and Thetela 1995; Neff, Dafouz, Díez, Herrera, Martínez, Prieto, Rica and Sancho in press), many of these more recent types of analyses have not yet been applied to non-native texts.

The present study, based on a corpus analysis, has a two-fold purpose. The first has to do with the signaling of writer-reader interaction. We attempt to account for the great differences between native and non-native texts in regard to the use of the modal verbs *can*, *could*, *may*, *might* and *must*. If the student texts show more or less use of these verbs, in what way does their use differ from that of the professional writers?

The second purpose of the study is to propose reasons for why this over-or underuse should occur in the EFL texts, as compared to the professional editorial texts. In a previous study (Neff, Dafouz, Díez, Herrera, Martínez, Prieto, Rica and Sancho in press), we maintained that the overuse of modals such as *can* and *could* and the underuse of *may* and *might* was due, in great measure, to two factors: typological mismatch between the L1 and the L2, and the transfer of discourse conventions from the L1 to the L2. In the present study, we address the latter factor once again but relate it to the characteristics of novice writers, native and non-native, as compared to those seen in the editorial texts of professional writers.

2. A Comparison of Modal and Reporting verbs: Spanish university writers (NNS), American university writers (NS)

In another study (Neff, *et al.*, forthcoming), we examined certain modals of probability and reporting verbs as used by Spanish EFL university students (NNS) and American university students (NS) to construct writer stance (Biber & Finnegan, 1989; Biber & Finnegan, 1988). The Spanish L2 writers' texts came from the *International Corpus of Learner English*, a corpus held at Louvain-le-Neuve and to which we have contributed as the Spanish participants. The American university writers' texts came from the LOCNESS corpus (argumentative texts written by British and American students), also held at Louvain.

In that study, the findings for the two groups in regards to modal verbs showed significant differences in the uses of *can*, *may*, and *might*, but not of *could*, as shown in Figure 1 below. The NNSs overused *can* (882 tokens) in comparison to NSs (514 tokens), while there was a NNS under-use of the three other verbs: *could* (NS, 290 vs. NNS, 273), *may* (NS, 196 vs. NNS, 108), and *might* (NS, 48 vs. NNS, 18).

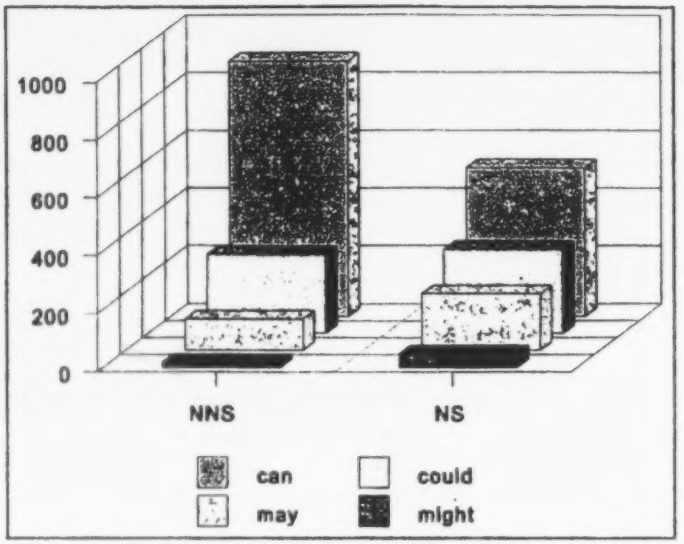

Figure 1 . Use of *can, could, may* and *might* by NNS (Spanish) and NS (American)

In that study not only did we find a great overuse of *can* by the Spanish university writers but also a pragmatically differentiated use. That is, when we used one of the OUP Wordsmith tools to find the words that most frequently collocated, we found that the Spanish university writers' overuse of *can* was linked to a high frequency of *we can*. This overuse of *we can*, specifically followed by verbs of mental processes (we can *think*, we can *wonder*) suggested a strategy for creating a sense of solidarity with the reader. This may be due to the fact that formal Spanish writing adopts a *we*-stance, which allows writers to avoid stating their arguments too strongly and consequently becoming the exclusive center of attention (Matte Bon, 1999: 266). The Spanish writers' overuse of *we can*, then, appears to be due to the transfer of pragmatic conventions from the students' L1 to their L2 English.

The contrastive analysis of the reporting verbs in that study, presented in Table 1, showed that while the American university writers' use of *say* accounted for 198 tokens, 22% of all their reporting verbs, the Spanish writers used *say* 289 times, constituting 35% of NNS reporting verbs. The next most frequent NS verb, *state*, was used 129 times, 14% of all their reporting verbs. In the Spanish writers' corpus, this verb, appearing in the twenty-second place, was used only 7 times, accounting for only 0.8% of their reporting verbs. For the American writers' corpus, the third reporting verb was *show* (12% of their reporting verbs), while in the Spanish corpus this verb was second in frequency (18% of NNS reporting verbs). Such overuse of *say* and under-use of *state* suggests that Spanish university writers have a limited range of neutral verbs (*say, state*) with which to present the principal propositions of an argument.

From the fourth verb on, NS/NNS differences in the use of reporting verbs was even more apparent. In the NS corpus, as might be expected for argumentative writing, the verbs *argue, agree* and *claim* are high in frequency. The use of verbs of such high pragmatic import allow the American university writes to take on aboard or distance themselves by degrees from the information they are reporting in a way

that is not available to the Spanish writers, who do not seem to be aware of the modulating effect of these verbs.

NS (American) REPORTING VERBS			NNS (Spanish) REPORTING VERBS		
N	VERB	FREQ.	N	VERB	FREQ.
1	SAY	198	1	SAY	289
2	STATE	129	2	SHOW	152
3	SHOW	111	3	PRESENT	88
4	ARGUE	80	4	EXPLAIN	37
5	PRESENT	67	5	REFER TO	36
6	AGREE	46	6	AGREE	23
7	CLAIM	32	7	EXPRESS	21
8	RECOGNIZE	24	8	MAINTAIN	18
9	EXPRESS	22	9	SUM UP	18
10	EXPLAIN	21	10	EMPHASIZE	13
11	SUGGEST	18	11	POINT OUT	13
12	WONDER	18	12	RECOGNIZE	13
13	CONCLUDE	16	13	ADMIT	10
14	MAINTAIN	14	14	CONCLUDE	10
15	POINT OUT	13	15	INDICATE	10
16	BRING OUT	12	16	POINT TO	10
17	DISAGREE	12	17	SUGGEST	10
18	REFER TO	12	18	ARGUE	8
19	NOTE	11	19	CLAIM	7
20	QUESTION	11	20	IMPLY	7
21	ADMIT	10	21	QUESTION	7
22	ACKNOWLEDGE	7	22	STATE	7
23	EMPHASIZE	7	23	UNDERLINE	7
24	IMPLY	5	24	WONDER	6
25	POINT TO	5	25	BRING ABOUT	3
26	HIGHLIGHT	3	26	DISAGREE	3
27	INDICATE	2	27	NOTE	3
28	ALLEGE	1	28	ALLEGE	2
29			29	PUT FORWARD	2
30			30	ACKNOWLEDGE	1
31			31	HIGHLIGHT	1
TOTAL		907	TOTAL		835

Table 1. Frequency for Reporting Verbs used by NNS and NS

3. A Comparison of Modal and Reporting verbs: Spanish university writers (SUW), American university writers (AUW) and professional newspaper writers (PNW)

In the present study, we attempt to explore these previous findings by carrying out a further analysis of the same modals and reporting verbs in the argumentative texts of Spanish university writers (SUW), American university writers (AUW) and professional writers of newspaper editorials (PNW). In this case, the corpora consisted of argumentative texts for the three groups: 194.845 words in the SUW corpus, 149.790 words in the AUW corpus and 113.475 words in the PNW corpus, part of an English-Spanish contrastive corpus of newspaper editorials held at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid (Marin, et al., 2000). We use this other English-Spanish corpus to verify some of the findings, both for English and for Spanish. As the number of words differs among the three corpora, the raw frequency count for each modal or reported verb was normed on a basis of per 10,000 words.

Since in the previous research the SUW texts showed positive politeness strategies in the use of *we can*, in the present study, we decided to include, in addition to the four modal verbs already mentioned, non-epistemic *must* (as in *we must consider*) in order to find out if this word cluster was being used in the same way as *we can say*, *we can see*, etc.

We first present the data with some overall figures for modal verbs, normed per 10,000 words. We then compare the corpora in pairs: the AUW with the PNW, the SUW with the AUW, and finally, SUW with PNW. The last section of data presents the results for the use of reporting verbs by the three groups.

3.1. Overall quantitative comparison of modal verb use among SUW, AUW, and PNW

Table 2 presents a comparison of normed figures for modal verbs *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, and *must* in general.

CORPUS	CAN	COULD	MAY	MIGHT	MUST
SUW	51.1	14.4	5.5	0.9	10.8
AUW	33.3	19.3	13	3.2	10.8
PNW	14.3	8.9	9.9	4.6	10.2

Table 2 . SUW, AUW AND PNW modal verb use, normed per 10,000 words

The most significant finding is the SUW use of *can*, in comparison with the other two groups. Although the SUW overused *can* in relation to both the AUW and the professional writers, the difference between the AUW and the professionals is also significant (See Table 3, below). Some of these differences may be due to genre effects, i.e., while newspaper editorials are argumentative texts, they are not exactly like the essays produced by the student writers. Also much of the use of *can* is related to dynamic modality (Palmer, 1979), i.e., expressing physical necessity or possibility, and thus, *can* is not an epistemic modal. However, we were particularly interested in the use of this modal with the pronoun *we* because the results of the previous research showed that Spanish writers construct an inclusive stance (*we can observe*, *we can think*, *we can wonder*) in comparison to the more impersonal stance used in English (*...as can be observed*, *X might be questioned*, etc., or by using an impersonal subject such as "the results of the previous research showed" instead of "in the previous research, *we observed* that...").

3.2. Comparison of modal verb use: AUW and PNW

Table 3, based on data from the Keyword tool of Word Smith, shows the significant differences between the AUW and the PNW. There were significant difference for *can*, *could*, and *may*, but not for *might* and *must*, which, therefore, do not appear in the table.

MODAL VERB	AMER. U WRITERS (AUW) Freq.	%	PROF. NEWS WRITERS (PNW) Freq.	%	P
CAN	514	0.34	168	0.14	0.0000
COULD	290	0.19	101	0.09	0.0000
MAY	196	0.13	113	0.10	0.0243
We + Modal	**Freq.**	**%**	**Freq.**	**%**	**P**
We can	23	0.02	7	< 0.01	0.0450

Table 3. Comparison of AUW and PNW for modal verbs and WE + modal verbs

The second column in the AUW section of the table presents the number of tokens and in the next column, the frequency of occurrence in all the AUW texts; the fourth and fifth columns appear the same figures for all of the PNW texts. These findings suggest that more proficient writers of English may rely less on modal verbs to modulate their propositions and perhaps more on adverbs or adjectives. On the other hand, the differences might also reflect genre factors. Biber, et al. (1999) found great differences between newspaper and academic prose in regard to *can*, *could*, *may* and deontic *must*, but not for much for *might*. The lower part of Table 3 shows the only significant difference between the two groups for WE + Modal verb. The higher frequency of *we can* for AUW is, perhaps, a result of genre factors as well as the transfer of the previously mentioned discourse strategies from Spanish to English (i.e., the use of *as we can see*, *we can point out*, etc.).

3.3. Comparison of modal verb use: SUW and AUW

The top part of Table 4, which compares SUW and AUW, shows significant differences for all the modals verbs, except *must*. These findings coincide with the previous research, except for the modal *could*. In this study, when the number of words for the SUW corpus was increased, a significant difference between the SUW-AUW corpora appeared for the modal verb *could*. In any case, these results are merely indicative of differing uses in numbers; each concordance line should be carefully explored in order to eliminate non-epistemic uses of *could*. However, the use of these non-epistemic *coulds* is still related to stance-taking, since this pattern usually involves a lexical verb denoting mental or verbal processes, such as *we could see*, and *we could say*, used as metadiscourse markers.

In order to better understand our findings for the SUW corpus, our research team has begun to look at the data for some of the other student writers in the *ICLE*, specifically, the French, Italian, and Dutch EFL writers (Neff, *et al.* 2002). In relation to the very high frequency of the modal *can* in the Spanish data, only the French university writers come close to the Spanish writers in their overuse of this modal. It seems reasonable, then, to suppose that such overuse on the part of the Spanish writers is not due to

interlanguage characteristics involving all the EFL writers in the *ICLE*, although there are probably some developmental factors involved.

The bottom part of the Table 4 presents the differences between the SUW and the AUW for *we can* and *we must*. In the case of the AUW use of *we can*, many of the tokens of *can* are non-epistemic, that is, they are followed by verbs of material processes (action) and, thus, reflect dynamic modality. On the other hand, the SUW use *we can* followed by verbs of mental processes, thus reflecting their use as metadiscourse markers (Dafouz, 1999), as does their use of *we must*. The same difference will be observed in the comparison with the SUW and PNW as well.

MODAL VERB	SPAN. U WRITERS (SUW) Freq.	%	AMER. U WRITERS (AUW) Freq.	%	P
CAN	997	0.51	514	0.34	0.0000
COULD	291	0.14	290	0.19	0.0005
MIGHT	18	< 0.01	48	0.03	0.0000
MAY	107	0.05	196	0.13	0.0000
We + Modal	**Freq.**	**%**	**Freq.**	**%**	**P**
We can	344	0.18	23	0.02	0.0000
We must	54	0.03	22	0.01	0,0148

Table 4. Comparison of SUW and AUW for modal verbs and WE + modal verbs

3.4. Comparison of modal verb use: AUW and PNW

Table 5 shows that the same four modal verbs (*can, could, might* and *may*) reflect significant differences between the AUW corpus and the PNW corpus, but not for *must*. As in the comparison of the SUW with the AUM, *can* and *could* were overused by the SUW, while *might* and *may* showed underuse. We propose that such over- and underuse reflects both developmental factors – *can* is one of the first modals that Spanish students learn – and L1 factors – students may be assuming that the modal *can* can be used wherever the Spanish modal *poder* can be used. However, this modal verb in Spanish has a wider epistemic meaning than *can* in English. For example, in Spanish, it is possible to say '*Puede* llover mañana', meaning 'It *might* rain tomorrow.').

MODAL VERB	SPAN. U WRITERS (SUW) Freq.	%	PROF. NEWS WRITERS (PNW) Freq.	%	P
CAN	997	0.51	163	0.14	0.0000
COULD	291	0.14	101	0.09	0.0003
MIGHT	18	< 0.01	113	0.10	0.0000
MAY	107	0.05	52	0.05	0.0000
We + Modal	**Freq.**	**%**	**Freq.**	**%**	**P**
We can	344	0.18	7	< 0.01	0.00000
We must	54	0.03	7	< 0.01	0,00007

Table 5. Comparison of SUW and AUW for modal verbs and WE + modal verbs

The bottom part of Table 5 presents the comparison of *we + modal verb* for the two groups. As in the comparison of the SUW with the AUW, *we may* and *we might* do not appear because they show no significant difference with their use by the professional writers. That is, for these two latter modals plus *we*, the Spanish writers look more like the other two groups. Since the SUW do show a significantly different use of *we can* and we *must*, our conclusion is that developmental factors influence which pragmatic devices the Spanish writers have at hand. In other words, the SUW do not seem to feel comfortable in using *may* and *might* and perhaps assume that *can* will carry all of the pragmatic meaning of the Spanish modal *poder*. These results may point to typological interference factors. Italian, like Spanish, has as few modals verbs and also uses the verb *potere* to indicate *may* and *might*. In other research carried out with the argumentative texts of the university writers mentioned above (Spanish, Belgian French, Italian and Dutch EFL students), both the Spanish and the Italian texts showed the highest frequencies for *we can see*, *we can find*, and *we can say*, pointing perhaps to a similar transfer of discourse strategies as well.

In relation to the use of *we must*, a great part of the SUW's use of this deontic modal co-occurs with *we* in sentences that look very much like metadiscursive topic introducers or closers (Dafouz, 2000), e.g., *We must also consider*, *We must take into account*..., *We must think that*..., *At last, we must state that* ..., etc. We believe this is related to the way writer stance is constructed in Spanish and, we suspect, may point to the broader issues of interactional patterns used in peninsular Spanish, that is, discourse strategies based on *-power* and *-distance* (Ballesteros 1999).

3.5. A comparison of reporting verb use among SUW, AUW and PNW

For the reporting verbs, the most significant differences between the SUW and the other two groups is shown in Tables 6 and 7, which display the frequencies for each token, the percentages of use within each corpus and the statistical significance of the differences.

REPORTING VERB	SPANISH U WRITERS (SUW)		AMERICAN U WRITERS (AUW)		P
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	
SAY	416	0.21	198	0.13	0.0000
UNDERLINE	8	<0.01	0	<0.01	0.034
DISAGREE	4	<0.01	12	<0.01	0.02186
RECOGNIZE	11	<0.01	24	0.02	0.005
CLAIM	16	<0.01	32	0.02	0.002
ARGUE	17	<0.01	80	0.05	0.0000
STATE	11	<0.01	129	0.09	0.0000

Table 6. Comparison of the SUW and the AUW for reporting verbs

The top part of Table 6 shows the two most significantly different reporting verbs produced by the SUW, in comparison to the AUW. As can be seen, the SUW overuse *say* and *underline*, by which they mean "emphasize". Below the bold line, the table shows the opposite, that is, the most significantly different reporting verbs under-produced by the SUW, in comparison to the AUW. The findings are similar to those already described for a previous study. It appears that SUW do not have a large repertoire of reporting verbs that carry pragmatic import.

However, when the SUW are compared to the PNW, the findings are different, but still involve almost the same set of reporting verbs. The top part of Table 7 shows the most significantly over-used verb by the SUW, in comparison to the PNW: *show*. This finding may be a result of genre effects, since some of the SUW essays were actually literature exam papers and thus contain sentences such as "...he is a corrupt character. This can be *shown* in the people who are around him...". As well, there may be some uses of the verb *show* which do not involve *show* in the sense of *prove* (*establish facts*). All of the other verbs listed below the bold line were underused by the SUW in comparison to the PNW. Three of these four underused verbs were also under-used by the SUW in comparison to the American student writers: *argue*, *recognize*, and *claim*. These findings suggest again that the Spanish EFL writers have a very limited repertoire with which to express writer attitude towards the reliability of the knowledge being put forth. One verb, *suggest*, was significantly underused by both the SUW and the AUW (18 tokens), in comparison with the professionals, pointing to the more sophisticated hedging devices used by the latter.

REPORTING VERB	SPANISH U WRITERS (SUW) Freq.	%	AMERICAN U WRITERS (AUW) Freq.	%	P
SHOW	172	0.09	198	0.13	0.0000
ARGUE	17	< 0.01	20	0.02	0.0449
RECOGNIZE	11	< 0.01	24	0.02	0.005
CLAIM	16	< 0.01	32	0.02	0.002
SUGGEST	14	< 0.01	34	0.03	0.0000

Table 7. Comparison of the SUW and the PNW for reporting verbs

As can be observed, the verb *say* is absent from Table 7 because the professionals had almost as many tokens of this verb (0.20%) as did the SUW (0.21%). We suggest that such a high frequency in newspaper editorials is due to the frequent need to report the speech of others in a rather verbatim fashion.

4. Conclusion

Since we teach at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid, the largest part of our research is focused on understanding what SUW do, rather than on what the AUW do in comparison to the professional writers. Both this study and previous ones have suggested that Spanish university writers construct a different stance from the one created by native writers. Below, we summarize our conclusions in this regard.

1) Some of the problems that SUW experience may be due to discourse differences between Spanish and English, that is, L1 factors. The fact that Italian EFL writers also overuse *we + modal verb of mental processes* suggest that transfer of discourse strategies does play an important part in the overuse of this pattern. However, there may be, as well, developmental factors to consider, for example, in the SUW's overuse of *we can* and *we must* as stance- or discourse-markers, but not of *we may* and *we might*. Since *can* is the first modal verb learned in the Spanish EFL classroom, Spanish EFL students may feel comfortable using it – in the assumption that it covers the same degrees of doubt as *poder* (*can*) in Spanish. Thus, students do not risk using other English modals, such as *may* and *might*.

2) The differences which appeared in the previous study in relation to the discourse conventions used in constructing writer stance were confirmed in this study. The SUW overuse of *we can* and *we must* followed by verbs of mental and verbal processes suggests a transfer of politeness strategies from the Spanish academic context. Such strategies point to broader issues of the interactional patterns based on positive-politeness used in peninsular Spanish, that is *–power* and *-distance*, while English may use, globally, more negative politeness strategies, that is, *–power* and *+distance*.

3) As for the use of reporting verbs as a qualification device, the comparison of data for the three groups revealed that the total tokens were similar, but the frequencies for individual verbs varied notably. This

suggests that Spanish EFL students concentrate on a limited set of verbs, which restricts possibilities of modulating their statements.

4) Data from another corpus (Marín, et al. 2000), not presented here, suggest that Spanish professional writers, as well as the English professional writers, may use other modality devices, namely certainty and doubt adjectives and especially manner adverbs ending in *-ly and -mente*. In any case, other components of the system of modality in English and in Spanish must be studied in order to distinguish among the typological factors (including the Spanish use of the subjunctive mood), the developmental factors and the pragmatic conventions in SUW writing.

5) We are well aware that some of these differences, particularly between the PNW corpus and those of the student writers (native and non-native), may be a result of genre characteristics, given that editorials are a very controlled type of text. Nevertheless, we believe that non-native texts should not be compared solely to native student texts, which may display some novice-writer characteristics not present in more sophisticated writing.

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